

Christianity's Dirty Words

#6 – “Heaven”

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“Sesame Street” has a game where they show four pictures and then ask you to figure out which one doesn’t fit. They’ll show an apple, a banana, an orange, and a platypus, then sing, “One of these things is not like the other, one of these things just doesn’t belong...” By the way, it’s the platypus.

You may think that song applies to our dirty word today. We finish up our sermon series called “Christianity’s Dirty Words,” in which we’ve been looking at words from our vocabulary of faith whose biblical meanings have been corrupted by the world. Sin, suffering, obedience...Heaven?

I’ll buy the fact that “Heaven” may not be a dirty word, but is easily the most misused and misunderstood. That’s not for lack for trying. It’s been the subject of movies like “What Dreams May Come,” countless TV shows, like the recent 2-hour Barbara Walters special, and it’s even become a mild expletive, like when the cartoon cat Snagglepuss would exclaim, “Heavens to Mergatroid!”

Before we can begin to understand the biblical idea of Heaven, we must agree to this disclaimer: we’re embarking on a dead-end journey. There’s simply no way we can understand what Heaven is truly like. Imagine trying to describe to an unborn baby, who has only known the inside of its mother’s womb, what life on the outside is like. How do you do it? Where do you start? That’s what it’s like for us to try and describe Heaven. Paul tells the Corinthians, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” It’s simply beyond our comprehension.

So what do we do when we can’t understand something? We try to put it in human terms. We do this with God all the time. It’s called anthropomorphizing. We give God eyes and ears, we talk about God being a He or a She, we speak of God holding us close or reaching out to us. We use our human terms to try and describe the indescribable. It’s not necessarily a wrong thing to do, but we run the risk of trivializing that which we are trying to understand.

Heaven is a perfect example of this. I think there are three ways in which we have misrepresented the biblical understanding of Heaven, and which we must be willing to discard if we’re going to come close to comprehending it. The first faulty description of Heaven is geographical. We talk about Heaven as a place up there somewhere, a physical destination where people with wings sit on clouds. This understanding was contested by Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut and first man in space who said, “I flew into space, but I did not see God there.” Our increasingly sophisticated technology has helped us understand the scope of our universe in such a way that a Heaven “up there” doesn’t hold water anymore. It may be helpful for us to think of it that way – after all, the “up there” concept of Heaven also provides a welcoming contrast to what’s in the other direction - but the Bible simply doesn’t give us a physical location.

A second way we’ve misrepresented Heaven is that we think of it chronologically. We understand eternal life only from the dimension of time. It’s a question I hear a lot: “Eternity: what am I going to do with all that time?” This was

captured by Gary Larson in one of his Far Side cartoons. It shows a guy with angel wings and a bored expression sitting on a cloud, thinking, "I wish I'd brought a magazine."

That probably describes the predominant worldview of Heaven. Streets of gold, angels with wings and harps, people sitting on clouds, forever...and ever...and ever. Pastor Dan Schaeffer made this very honest comment about his view of Heaven. He said, "I was more grateful about not going to Hell than I was thrilled by the hope of Heaven. It was like finding out you didn't have to get your gums scraped after all; instead, you got to watch paint dry. It seemed a choice between eternal punishment and eternal boredom."

So we try to describe Heaven geographically and chronologically. The final way we've misrepresented Heaven is that we've come to understand it selfishly. We've come to think that Heaven exists purely for our own pleasure, a reward for being good here on Earth. Heaven is like the ultimate retirement village; it's an eternal weekend in Palm Springs. When we get to Heaven, St. Peter stamps our hand and we're turned loose in this divine amusement park where we can eat Krispy Kremes and Reese's Cups all day and still maintain our svelte physique. Our mistake is thinking that Heaven is about us.

The writers of the Bible, while still human, had divine inspiration in describing the Bible, which may mean their representation has more truth to it than our modern ones. In the book of Revelation, John writes about getting taken up into Heaven, where he sees God on his throne, surrounded by four living creatures. John says, "Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

If Heaven is a place, then John says it is a place of worship. Revelation says that Heaven is basically an eternal worship service. Now, before you roll your eyes, remember this: in Heaven, everything that we know on earth to be imperfect will be perfected. On earth we can only know imperfect joy, imperfect health, even imperfect love. But in Heaven, everything will be perfect, and our worship will be perfect worship, which could mean that everyone sings on key, the sound system always works, and no one ever drops a communion tray. Whatever our heavenly worship is like, we do know this: we were created for God, and we fulfill our highest purpose when we are worshipping our Creator. In Heaven, we will do what we were created to do.

The Bible also addresses the issue of the chronology of Heaven. We can only think in terms of time, but we have to remember that God is timeless. In the very beginning of Genesis, when God creates light and separates the light from the darkness, God is in essence creating a way for humans to mark time – days and nights. But God existed before time was made. A good friend once described it this way: We watch a movie from beginning to end, but God can see the whole movie at once. Heaven isn't necessarily a place, or a length of time, but a way of being, a way of existing eternally in perfect relationship with God.

Finally, we are told that Heaven is not about our wants and needs. That doesn't mean that we won't enjoy it; after all, it is the closest we will ever get to God. But Heaven is about what God wants, and what God wants more than anything, is for us to be with Him.

How do you feel when you return from a long trip and walk in the door of your house? Those familiar sights, that favorite scent, those same clothes still piled on the stairway. Is there a truer axiom than, "It's always good to come home"? When we die,

through our faith in Jesus Christ, we don't leave home; we go home, to be with our loved ones who have gone before us, and with our Creator. In John's gospel Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many mansions." That doesn't mean when we die we'll get a Victorian with a two-car garage or a Tudor with a nice deck on the back. Jesus isn't saying we'll get our dream house; he's saying we'll be home.

As comfortable as we may get here on earth, we must remember that this is not our home. We are only travelers passing through, as Paul reminds us in Philippians when he says, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

When we go home, we will be made perfect. Did you hear what Paul said? Our lowly bodies will be transformed so they are like Christ's glorious body." Do you know what that means? Adios, Alka Seltzer. Take a hike, Tylenol. So long, Zoloft. Later, Lipitor. We can even bid good riddance to Rogaine!

One of the most awesome promises Heaven holds for us is the perfection of our bodies. Alzheimer's won't have the last word. Cancer won't have the last word. Heart disease and birth defects and brain tumors won't have the last word. God will have the last word. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." I doubt any of us want to die, but what the Bible promises is that we need not fear death, because it is not the end of our lives, only the end of everything that has made life hard to live.

Paul reminds us to "fix our eyes on what is unseen, because what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." In other words, we are called to live with the promise of Heaven always on our minds, and letting those promises guide how we live each day. C.S. Lewis said, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were precisely those who thought most about the next one." As we look forward to the day when we will go home, may we do our part to live out the prayer: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven."